

Astronauts touch down in chilly Kazakhstan steppe

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Japanese astronaut Aki Hoshide smiles after landing in a Soyuz capsule outside the town of Arkalyk, Kazakhstan, on Monday, Nov. 19, 2012. Hoshide along with NASA's Sunita Williams, and Russian astronaut Yury Malenchenko touched down in the dark, chilly expanses of central Kazakhstan onboard a Soyuz capsule Monday after a 125-day stay at the International Space Station. (AP Photo/Maxim Shipenkov)

Three astronauts touched down in the dark, chilly expanses of central Kazakhstan onboard a Soyuz capsule Monday after a 125-day stay at the

International Space Station.

NASA's Sunita Williams, Russian astronaut Yury Malenchenko and Aki Hoshide of Japan's JAXA space agency landed at 07:56 a.m. local time (0156 GMT) northeast of the town of Arkalyk.

Eight helicopters rushed search-and-recovery crew to assist the crew, whose capsule did not parachute onto the exact planned touchdown site due to a minimal delay in procedures.

With the departure of the outgoing crew, NASA astronaut Kevin Ford has taken command of the space station, where he remains with Russian colleagues Oleg Novitsky and Yevgeny Tarelkin. They will be joined next month by NASA's Tom Marshburn, Chris Hadfield of the [Canadian Space Agency](#), and Russia's Roman Romanenko.



International Space Station crew members Russian astronaut Yury Malenchenko, center, U.S. astronaut Sunita Williams, right, and Japanese astronaut Aki

Hoshide, left, rest shortly after landing in a Soyuz capsule outside the town of Arkalyk, Kazakhstan, on Monday, Nov. 19, 2012. The three astronauts touched down in the dark, chilly expanses of central Kazakhstan onboard a Soyuz capsule Monday after a 125-day stay at the International Space Station. (AP Photo/Maxim Shipenkov)

The Soyuz is the only means for international astronauts to reach the orbiting laboratory since the decommissioning of the U.S. shuttle fleet in 2011.

Williams, Malenchenko and Hoshide undocked from the space station Sunday at 1023 GMT to begin their return to earth.

Around 28 minutes before touchdown, the three modules of the Soyuz craft separated, leaving the 2.1-meter tall capsule to begin its entry into orbit.

A series of parachutes deployed to bring the capsule to gentle floating speed.



Members of the ground rescue team carry International Space Station crew member Aki Hoshide, of Japan, center, shortly after landing near the town of Arkalyk, Kazakhstan, on Monday, Nov. 19, 2012. Hoshide, NASA's Sunita Williams, and Russian astronaut Yuri Malenchenko touched down in the dark, chilly expanses of central Kazakhstan onboard a Soyuz capsule Monday after a 125-day stay at the International Space Station. (AP Photo/Maxim Shipenkov)

Winds pulled the descent module on its side in the snowy terrain, which is a common occurrence, but the crew was nonetheless swiftly hoisted out by the recovery crew and lifted onto reclining chairs and swaddled in blankets to shield them from the 12 Fahrenheit degree (-11 Celsius degree) temperature.

The chairs are designed to afford the astronauts comfortable acclimatization after months of living in gravity-free conditions.

"For me, everything was very good," a smiling Williams told recovery staff, speaking in Russian.

Malenchenko has now spent 642 days in space, making him the sixth most experienced space traveler in history.

Williams has a spent a total of 322 days in space over two missions. She and Hoshide conducted a crucial spacewalk earlier this month to work on a leaky radiator system outside the space station.

That took Williams' total cumulative spacewalk time to 50 hours and 40 minutes—a record for a female astronaut.



A Russian Soyuz TMA-05M spacecraft, right, lays on the ground as members of a rescue team stand nearby after it landed in a remote area near the town of Arkalyk, Kazakhstan, on Monday, Nov. 19, 2012. Three astronauts touched down in the dark, chilly expanses of central Kazakhstan onboard the Soyuz capsule Monday after a 125-day stay at the International Space Station. (AP

Photo/Maxim Shipenkov)

NASA says the returning expedition conducted a range of scientific experiments while at the [space station](#), included testing radiation levels on the orbiting outpost, assessing the effects of microgravity on the spinal cord, and investigating melting glaciers, seasonal changes and human impacts on the ecosystem.

The [crew](#) was to be taken to the town of Kostanai, from where Williams and Hoshide would board a Gulfstream jet for a trip to Houston, Texas, while Malenchenko was to return to a Russian space facility outside Moscow.

NASA footage showed celebrating recovery workers at the landing site erecting a sign marking the successful touchdown.

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